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ROBERT E. LEE THE OPERATIONAL COMMANDER:

A STAR ON HIS OWN COURSE

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract of

ROBERT E. LEE THE OPERATIONAL COMMANDER:

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To add or detract from the numerous accounts of Robert E. Lee and his place in the American Civil War is an ambitious task. The central theme of this research paper, however, will be the analysis of Lee as the operational commander of the Army of Northern Virginia in his theater of operations. It is not intended to merely compare the win/loss columns of all his tactical engagements. This paper is meant to transcend the mythical military status of Lee and offer lessons learned for the modern military commander at the operational level.

The purpose of this paper is to concentrate on bridging the gap between tactical operations and strategic goals; that of the operational art. The primary focus will be that of the Antietam and Gettysburg campaigns. It will also discuss some of the less glorious aspects of campaigning such as designing the campaign, command and control, reconnaissance and logistics to show how important these are in developing a coherent plan that aids the commander in achieving his objectives.

## CAMPAIGN DEFINITION

A series of related military operations designed to achieve one or more strategic objectives within a given time and space is the U.S. Army's definition of a campaign.<sup>1</sup>

The U.S. Marine Corps defines a campaign as "a series of related military actions undertaken over a period of time to achieve a specific objective within a given region. Campaigning reflects the operational level of war, at which results of individual tactical actions are combined to fulfill the needs of strategy."<sup>2</sup>

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Volumes of work have been written about the American Civil War, especially its military leaders. No one has drawn as much ink to paper as General Robert E. Lee. While certainly deserving much attention for his leadership as the underdog during this pivotal struggle in our American history, many remember Lee today as an icon. He was considered the beau ideal of the Southern Confederacy. Lee will always be remembered as a tactical genius, much like Napoleon, who possessed skills as a military commander above and beyond those of any Union General that he faced during the Civil War. But Lee, like Napoleon in his final campaigns, was unable to translate tactical success into strategic victory. This occurred due to his failure to recognize the true essence of the operational art of war. Operational art is the critical link between strategy and tactics.

Lee, throughout the war, did not efficiently or judiciously employ his forces because he failed to understand the key aspects of operational art. Winning Napoleonic battles alone did not translate into a single decisive victory which would in turn generate the South's strategic goals. If Lee had properly applied the art of war at the operational level he would have stood a better chance at accomplishing the South's strategic objectives in his theater of operations. It would have allowed Lee, who usually possessed a smaller force than his opponents, to

avoid the costly attrition warfare which ultimately led to surrender at Appomattox. By analyzing Lee as an operational commander, one can learn from his actions. As Otto von Bismark stated: " Fools say that they learn by experience, I prefer to learn by other people's experience."<sup>3</sup>

Lee, from the time he took command of the Army of Northern Virginia at the peninsula campaign until his final days in command chose the "direct attack" method of warfare. It became his trade mark and he paid a high price for this choice, for instance, during the Seven Days Battle ( June 26- July 1, 1862 ), Lee lost over 20,000 men - one fourth of the entire Southern Army at that time. While possibly necessary at that stage of the war, attrition warfare on that level would eventually lead Lee down a path of destruction. As late as July, 1864 Lee still sought the offensive. "If we can defeat or drive the armies of the enemy from the field, we shall have peace. All our efforts should be devoted to that object."<sup>4</sup>

## CHAPTER II

### LEE THE JOMINIAN

Lee, as most generals during the Civil War, was influenced by Jomini. Clausewitz was not translated or taught in America until a century later. But was Lee a pure Jominian ? Jomini emphasized four strategic principles:

1. The commander should endeavor by strategic measures to bring the major part of his forces successively to bear on the decisive areas of the theater of war, while menacing the enemy's communications without endangering his own.
2. He should maneuver in such a way as to engage the masses of his forces against fractions of the enemy.



3. He should endeavor by tactical measures to bring his masses to bear on the decisive area of the battlefield or part of the enemy's line it was important to overwhelm.

4. He should not only bring his masses to bear on the decisive point of the field but should put them in battle speedily and together in a simultaneous effort.<sup>5</sup>

It should be noted that Jomini envisioned the decisive point as the point where the enemy was the weakest. Clausewitz teaches that a decisive point is associated with an enemy's strength. At Antietam and Gettysburg Lee attacked the North at its point of strength. Jomini also taught that the primary objectives in war were places rather than armies: the occupation of territory or the seizure of such "decisive points" as capitals. Jomini proposed that when one's territory was invaded, the commander should invade the territory of the enemy; this was the mark of "true genius." Perhaps Lee had this in mind when invading the North. Jomini made no connection between war, technology, national life, and political objectives. War was viewed as an exercise carried out by professionals divorced from politics. Lee for the most part displayed this same attitude.

Lee chose his particular strategy and tactics from lessons learned during the war with Mexico (1846-47) in which a smaller force of General Winfield Scott defeated Santa Anna. Tactics at that time favored the offense and were centered around the smooth bore musket. Introduced after the Mexican War, the rifle had considerably greater range and accuracy than its predecessor. Rifles revolutionized tactics by neutralizing the cavalry charge on the battlefield and by placing a premium upon cover for the infantry. Combined with entrenchments as advocated by Dennis

Hart Mahan, West Point's chief tactical instructor, (1830-1871), the rifle immensely augmented the power of the defense.<sup>6</sup> Lee, in retrospect, appears to have been ignorant of this "revolution in military affairs" and later suffered high casualties as a result.<sup>7</sup>

### CHAPTER III

#### CONFEDERATE POLICY/STRATEGY

An operational commander must link his strategy to the policy established by his government. In other words there should be a policy-strategy match. The South's political objective of Southern independence was thought to be best served by a military strategy of attrition based on prolonging the war as a means to breaking Northern resolve. This strategy was dictated by Confederate President Jefferson Davis, a West Point graduate. Such a strategy would have been best accomplished by dispersing Lee's forces over a large amount of territory. Lee, however, chose to concentrate his army in northern Virginia, to guard the capital in Richmond.

Lee, a native Virginian with ties to one of the first families to settle there, also felt he had to defend his home land. While viewing his army as the center of gravity, he also thought the government in Richmond (a decisive point) was as important. Jefferson Davis and the capital could have easily been moved to a more secure area farther south eliminating it as a critical vulnerability. Lee, unaware of his political responsibilities when asked his opinion of moving the capital

replied: "That is a political question ... and you politicians must determine it. I shall endeavor to take care of the army, and you must make the laws and control the government."<sup>8</sup> Lee also wanted his army concentrated in northern Virginia because he believed in the principle of mass and felt that he must adopt the strategic offense in order to take the pressure off of Virginia. Given the South's relative weakness, Lee's strategy was questionable at best - both as a viable means of attaining the South's political goals and also in regard to operational practicability, particularly the South's logistical ability to sustain offensive campaigns.<sup>9</sup>

It could be argued that his offensive "campaigns" were merely raids because he knew he could not protect his logistical lines of communication very far into enemy territory. Even if he had been victorious at Antietam or Gettysburg, he would have been eventually compelled to withdraw back to Virginia due to logistical concerns. Lee's ethos did not allow his army to fight as Sherman and Grant did to win the war. He and his government felt it was necessary to show the North as well as the rest of the world that it was a civilized nation, thereby adding to its legitimacy for foreign recognition.

Lee could have adopted a Fabian type strategy, much like Washington during the American Revolution, and avoided a general engagement with the Army of the Potomac. But as evidenced by his actions he seemed unable to resist the temptation of that single decisive battle of Napoleonic proportion whenever he came in

contact with his enemy. He remained throughout the Civil War, too focused on the battle itself. "It is the objectives of the war, not the battles in the war that serve the nation's interest."<sup>10</sup>

#### CHAPTER IV

##### ANTIETAM AND GETTYSBURG

Lee embarked upon two campaigns that were at odds with the strategy he and his government had selected. In spite of a Confederate policy of simple survival, Lee chose an ambitious offensive strategy during his Antietam and Gettysburg campaigns which both failed in their strategic purpose. Lee chose the direct approach over the indirect, especially when faced with trying to produce a decisively critical battle.

In designing a campaign, the commander's key responsibility is to provide focus - to fuse a variety of disparate tactical acts, extended over time and space, into a single, coalescent whole.<sup>11</sup> The design should focus on all the various efforts of the campaign resolutely on the established theater strategic aim.<sup>12</sup>

When he embarked upon the 1862 Maryland campaign he did so with certain objectives in mind. He had hoped to gain a victory on northern soil, encourage the Northern Peace movement, recruit Southern sympathizers in the border state of Maryland and draw in foreign aid from Europe. When a copy of Lee's Special Orders No. 191 was lost and eventually found its way to the Union General

George McClellan, it certainly had an impact on the campaign but was not the decisive factor. Special Orders No. 191 was the operational plan for the invasion into Maryland. McClellan obviously took advantage of his information as evidenced by his sudden change in tactics after Lee's Army had departed from Frederick, Maryland. McClellan had Lee at a great disadvantage by knowing exactly how spread out Lee's Army was. (See appendix A-1,2) Nevertheless, Lee did not realize that his plans should have been aborted. Instead of retreating into Virginia, he allowed himself to be drawn into a direct confrontation at Antietam against overwhelming odds at which he had a minimum chance of winning, even tactically. Had it not been for Lee's operational agility (A. P. Hill's arrival), his army may have been annihilated. In fact it produced the bloodiest single battle in American history producing almost 23,000 combined casualties in twelve hours.<sup>13</sup>

With limited resources, neither Lee, or the Confederacy could afford such an expenditure of blood unless it was assured a great strategic gain. Standing and fighting at Antietam, even though on the tactical defense offered few benefits except that of the strategic initiative. A withdrawal back into native Virginia would have preserved the South's offensive power for use later, if so desired. Antietam also gave Abraham Lincoln enough of a Northern victory needed to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, which helped insure that Britain and France would not come to the aid of the Confederacy. Lee's somewhat tactical

draw at Antietam actually became an operational defeat, which in turn compelled him to abort his first strategic offensive campaign. (C.S.A. lost 11,724 or 22.6%, U.S. lost 11,657 or 15.5%)<sup>14</sup>

The Gettysburg campaign has been referred to as Lee's most audacious act and represents the apogee of his grand strategy of the offensive.<sup>15</sup> The objectives for this campaign were: the necessity to upset Federal offensive plans, avoidance of a siege of the Richmond defenses, alleviation of supply problems in unforaged country, encouragement of the peace movement in the North, drawing the Federal army north of the Potomac in order to maneuver and even the relief of Vicksburg. Unlike Antietam, no mention of a victory on northern soil is made. Some or all of these objectives may have contributed to the decision to commence the campaign. Lee, however, can not be solely responsible for the decision. The Confederate cabinet in Richmond voted five to one (twice) in favor of this strategic offense, with only Postmaster General John H. Reagan voting in the negative due to events surrounding Vicksburg. Davis, of course, gave the final approval despite events out West and in the South; notably Vicksburg's need for re-enforcement. But it was still Lee's plan.

Some of the operational objectives were met with success, but at a questionable price tag. The Federal's offensive plans in Virginia were certainly altered but none the less fulfilled on their own soil. Richmond did not avoid the siege, it was merely

postponed. Supply problems while possibly alleviated, only became more of a challenge in a different area and would still keep Lee's army on a string attached to Virginia. Encouragement of the peace movement did not come to fruition. Finally, the campaign itself did nothing for the relief of Vicksburg, which surrendered almost 30,000 Confederates on 4 July 1863. Lee's losses at Gettysburg were estimated at almost 30% and amounted to as many as those captured at Vicksburg.<sup>16</sup>

## CHAPTER V

### OPERATIONAL FAILURES/LESSONS

Lee, during his Gettysburg campaign plan, committed errors in designing the campaign; mainly command and control, culmination, reconnaissance, and logistics that affected the outcome of the battle and possibly the whole campaign.

Command and control of an army is an important operational function, one which challenged Lee to his utmost during the Gettysburg campaign. Evidence shows that Lee probably did not understand the real function of a staff and certainly failed to put together an adequate staff for his army. After Chancellorsville, he realized Jackson's absence would require him to exercise more direct command over his units, thus another reorganization of the army was necessary.

Reorganization, however, created certain drawbacks. Two of the three corps commanders and five of his nine divisions were led by men who previously had served either briefly or not at all

in their new capacities. Six of the thirty-seven brigades were under new commanders and another half dozen were led by colonels whom Lee considered not qualified for promotion. With Jackson gone Lee could no longer rely on general suggestions. "We must all do more than formerly,"<sup>17</sup> Lee told one general. This statement applied as much to Lee as it did to anyone. General suggestions or a lack of specific instructions may have led to the onset of the battle at Gettysburg. Historian, Douglas Southall Freeman called Gettysburg "a wane in Confederate command" because the demands of the field were beyond the capacity and resources of a Confederate army which had taken the offense immediately after a most extensive reorganization.<sup>18</sup>

Had Lee sincerely intended to avoid a chance battle, he could have issued specific rules of engagement (ROE) orders to his subordinates so stating his intentions. Reports of Generals Hill, Ewell and Longstreet mention no such instructions prior to the battle. Lee's own reports do not mention any such restraints. Only in his 31 July 1863 report, after the battle, did Lee mention that he did not intend to fight a general engagement, "unless attacked". Lee's forces were not attacked. His units initially attacked and were the aggressors for the three days of this ad hoc battle. The fog and friction of war overcame Lee, and control of his army became too much for him.

Unlike the vague and discretionary orders Lee had issued throughout the week leading up to battle and during the three days of fighting, in the course of which his messages had been



verbal and for the most part tentative, his instructions for withdrawal were written and precise, allowing discretion to no one. Lee even took added precaution and spoke to A.P. Hill in person utilizing a map to trace the line of march making certain there was no possibility of a misunderstanding.

Delegation of authority under orders that not only permitted but encouraged a wide degree of latitude in their execution by subordinates, had been the basis for Lee's greatest triumphs, particularly during the ten months leading up to Chancellorsville in which he had Jackson to rely upon. Relying on this type system at Gettysburg with new corps commanders failed him.

Lee's second failure dealt with the culmination point.

" Unless it is strategically decisive, every offensive operation will sooner or later reach a point where the strength of the attacker no longer significantly exceeds that of the defender, and beyond which continued offensive operations therefore risk overextension, counterattack and defeat. In operational theory, this is called the culminating point. The art of attack at all levels is to achieve decisive objectives before the culminating point is reached."<sup>19</sup>

Lee as the operational commander should have planned for and sensed when he reached or was about to reach his culminating point, whether intended or not and have reverted to the defense at Gettysburg. Clausewitz wrote:

"Once the mind is set on a certain course toward its goal ... it may easily happen that arguments which would compel one to stop, and justify another in acting, will not be fully appreciated. Meanwhile the action continues, and in the sweep of motion one crosses... the line of culmination, without knowing it... It is therefore important to calculate this point correctly when planning a campaign. An attacker may otherwise take on more than he can manage and, as it were, get into debt..."<sup>20</sup>

Clausewitz also stated:

" In deciding whether or not to continue the engagement, it is not enough to consider the loss of men, horses, and guns; one also has to weigh the loss of order, courage, confidence, cohesion, and plan. The decision rests chiefly on the state of morale..." <sup>21</sup>

Lee either did not pay attention to this concept and paid his debt for it by heavy casualties on the third day at Gettysburg or he was weighing the state of morale too heavily. Coming off the victory of Chancellorsville in which Lee miraculously defeated a much larger force influenced his decision. Giving up the initiative and ground at Gettysburg could have had an adverse affect on his army's morale. Longstreet had recognized the futility of the plan of attack and had tried to dissuade Lee from pursuing it.<sup>22</sup> Lee, it seems had made up his mind, and did not realize his culmination point until too late. (See appendix A-5) This was a human mistake created by past victories. The bigger mistake however was at the operational level of a culminating point. It could easily be argued that he had passed this long before the Gettysburg campaign. With his strategic offenses, resulting in tactical offenses, he was expending irreplaceable assets. Chancellorsville cost Lee over 13,000 men.

Much has been written about the reconnaissance failures surrounding the Gettysburg campaign, especially material condemning General J.E.B. Stuart. A close analysis of Lee's orders to Stuart and alternative resources available to Lee should shed a different light on this subject. On June 22, 1863

Lee communicated to Stuart asking "Do you know where [Hooker] is and what he is doing?" <sup>23</sup> The following day Lee sent another directive to Stuart containing the following relevant provisions:

"If General Hooker's army remains inactive, you can leave two brigades to watch him, and withdraw with the three others, but should he not appear to be moving northward I think you had better withdraw this side of the mountain tomorrow night, cross at Shepherdstown the next day and move to Fredericktown.

You will, however, be able to judge whether you can pass around their army without hinderance, doing them all the damage you can and cross the river east of the mountains. In either case, after crossing the river, you must move on and feel the right of Ewell's troops, collecting information, provisions, etc."<sup>24</sup> (emphasis added)

Lee, by this time of the movement north, still was unsure of the location of the Federals and information of their location should have been a priority. As an operational commander, about to enter unknown territory, who knew Stuart's personality well, he should have given short, concise, single mission oriented and not discretionary instructions. Dissecting the two dispatches brings to surface several problems with them.

One conclusion is that the orders are ambiguous and uncertain with regard to such critical matters as times and places for Stuart's movements. Second, Stuart was given the discretion of riding around the Federal Army, an offense of which many writers have condemned him. Third, Stuart could not perform reconnaissance adequately if he were to also perform the myriad of other tasks assigned. A priority of tasks should have been assigned. Instead, Stuart's capturing 125 wagons and 400 prisoners requiring parole at Rockville, Maryland, caused a time consuming evolution that distracted him from the ever important

task of intelligence gathering. (See appendix A-4) Stuart could however have detached a smaller unit to perform this task.

Fourth, proceeding east around the Union army would have been inconsistent with protecting the Confederate army's right. It would have been asking too much for Stuart to protect Ewell's right and at the same time screen eighty-five thousand Union troops between himself and Ewell. Lee, however, never envisioned the Federal army being in a position to prevent Stuart from accomplishing this task.

Lee, nevertheless, had alternatives to collecting reconnaissance. Once on the move without proper intelligence from Stuart, Lee could have gone to a contingency plan to correct this vacuum. As pointed out in Stuart's report after the battle of Gettysburg, that if cavalry "in advance of the army the first day of Gettysburg "was wanted, "it must be remembered that the cavalry [Jenkin's brigade] specially selected for advance guard to the army by the commanding general on account of its geographical location at the time, was available for this purpose."<sup>25</sup> There were also three cavalry brigades near Lee that could have been dispatched; Imboden's operating to the west, and those of B.H. Robertson and W.E. Jones guarding the passes below the Potomac that could easily have been spared. (See appendix A-4) This evidence led to no excuse for Lee's finding himself at Chambersburg on 28 June without a single regiment of cavalry.<sup>26</sup> This important reconnaissance failure was essentially that of the operational commander, Lee.

The most important operational failure was that of logistics for operational sustainment. The Army of Northern Virginia was a lean army. It traveled very light, therefore it required vast trains of supply and ordnance wagons. If the supply train for the Gettysburg campaign had been kept together it would have been a sixty mile long column. During this campaign the trains were broken up into at least three groups, one for each corps which traveled over a different route and a different time.

Lee chose to invade Pennsylvania in June 1863 by synchronizing his forces through the Shenandoah and Cumberland Valleys. (See appendix A-3) Not only did this route provide operational protection, but it afforded Lee the resources of one of the richest agricultural regions in the East. The great disadvantage however, was the lack of direct rail connections with the Confederacy.<sup>27</sup> Once Lee's army left Culpeper Court House in mid June 1863 to move to the valley, it no longer had the benefits of a location near a railhead. Railroads, another revolutionary item, played an important role in the Civil War, much as they did for Moltke during the Wars for German Unification (1866-70). Railroads aided troop movements and could also negate interior line advantages. Winchester became Lee's most advanced base in friendly territory once General Ewell had captured it in June 1863, but it was more than fifty miles from Culpeper and over ninety from Staunton, the only available railroad terminals. Dependence upon the purchase or seizure of supplies far from a railroad often meant a situation where the

army either feasted or starved. Not as obvious, but just as important, were the maintenance of 20,000 horses.<sup>28</sup>

Even more important was the logistics of ordnance. Porter Alexander, Longstreet's chief artilleryman, stated in a letter to his father, that the three days of severe fighting at Gettysburg had left the army "almost entirely out of ammunition. I do not think we can ever successfully invade, the ammunition question alone being enough to prevent it."<sup>29</sup> A fifty percent dud rate of Confederate ammunition also complicated matters more by requiring larger amounts to be effective.

All other logistical needs, except medical supplies, consisted of providing substitutions for items when they wore out. Wagons, rifles, cannon, horses, uniforms, all would require replacement if campaigns lengthened. The most critical for an infantry force as large as Lee's was the need for boots, especially when required to march long distances. The quick decision to invade the north after success at Chancellorsville gave little time to procure or manufacture the necessary boots.

Lee's logistical theory of living off the land lent itself to supplying marches when the Federals did not pose an immediate threat. If Lee could have avoided the enemy, he could have successfully raided enemy territory. He had to keep his army on the move to do this and would have to retreat if the Federal army forced him to remain too long in one place.

Lee was criticized by Beauregard before starting the invasion because he considered it a violation of many principles of war

because of supply lines. Lee's grasp of logistics did not extend beyond his department. From 1863 until the war's end, while his army was living on half-rations, large quantities of foodstuffs assembled by the commissary agents and collectors of the government's tax-in-kind, simply rotted at the depots.<sup>30</sup>

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, Lee's tactical flair did not overcome operational and strategic shortcomings. In fact, it proved to be irrelevant; even if tactical victories had occurred at Antietam or Gettysburg, both would still have been adding to operational defeats. His pattern of high casualty rates should have been realized before embarking upon these strategic offenses. Both Antietam and Gettysburg represented substantial and unacceptable risks for an army with limited and diminishing resources.

A victory at Gettysburg or Antietam would not have been any more decisive than Lee's victories at Seven Days, Second Manassas, Fredericksburg or Chancellorsville. In no case did Lee ever annihilate the enemy, even though each of the opposing generals in those engagements had less tactical skill than Meade or Hooker. In every instance the enemy only fell back a few miles and survived. Even if a defeat was incurred, the North while possibly demoralized and disorganized, Lincoln could call upon McClellan or Grant to regroup them.

Lee's biggest failure was in answering the operational art

question of what are the likely derivative costs and risks involved in such a campaign as Antietam or Gettysburg.

In the end Lee was not the victim of a pattern of hard luck as many during his day had stated when they referred to him as the Old Testament general, Sisera, " ... that the stars in their courses had fought against him."<sup>31</sup> ( Judges 5:20 ) Lee as an operational commander was a star on his own course and charted his own destiny.

Many future crisis will require military commanders to chart their own destiny. No matter what size or nature of the next mission - whether it be general war, crisis response, peacekeeping, peace enforcement, nation building etc, the concepts and thought process of operational art will apply in one form or another. We will face the same challenges that have burdened generals since the beginning of armed conflict -- how to avoid the enemy's main strength and how to strike a decisive blow against him.<sup>32</sup> If one of the greatest American generals made mistakes in the operational art of warfare, we should learn from these mistakes to prevent us less gifted individuals from repeating history.



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